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A Fiery Gospel: The Battle Hymn of the Republic and the Road to Righteous War

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Review

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Gamble, Richard M. *A Fiery Gospel: The Battle Hymn of the Republic and the Road to Righteous War*. Cornell University Press, 2019. \$28.95 ISBN 9781501736414

In this engagingly written and thoroughly researched book, Richard M. Gamble traces the history of Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" from its conception at the outset of the Civil War through the beginning of the 21st century. Gamble argues that the "Battle Hymn," with its biblically informed themes of righteous and redemptive violence should be understood not simply as an aspect of America's civil religion, but more specifically as an expression of religious nationalism, a self-conscious identification of the United States with God's ongoing war against sin and evil. Built upon the interconnected notions that God's purposes can be discerned in the workings of history, that violence against the enemies of righteousness is often a moral duty, and that the United States has a special place in the fulfillment of divine providence, Gamble shows that the "Battle Hymn" has served as a path to "righteous war" for generations of Americans.

As the author of the "Battle Hymn" and as a consistent presence in American public life for more than half a century Julia Ward Howe played a central role in the evolution of the hymn from its roots in the culture of abolitionism to its nearly ubiquitous place in America's militant, religious nationalism. In addition to her abilities as a poet, Gamble finds that Howe was a gifted publicist on her own behalf, using magazine articles, church sermons, lyceum lectures and memoirs to recount (though not always the same way) the genesis of the "Battle Hymn" in her November 1861 visit to Washington D.C. The vision of a righteous war that emerged in the lines of the hymn had been nurtured by the radical antislavery ethos of liberal Unitarianism, but was it was raised to a fever pitch by the sound of Union regiments singing the "John Brown Song" in the "circling camps" she visited near the wartime capital. Yet despite these originating

influences, the language of the Battle Hymn proved highly adaptable to later generations because it contained no direct references to Unitarian theology, John Brown, sectional identity, or even a specific war. What did come through was an image of American identity steeped in biblical language and linked directly to the millennial prophecies of the Book of Revelation that made the Civil War a holy conflict and set the stage for generations of crusading religious nationalism.

Gamble implies that emancipation and military victory over the “Slave Power” allowed abolitionists like Howe to fully embrace American nationalism and hence to apply the themes of the “Battle Hymn’s” crusading religious nationalism to support postwar American expansion, including the Spanish America War. In doing so, she connected the poem with the vision of militant internationalists like Theodore Roosevelt who used it at the Progressive Party convention in 1912 and consistently advocated its adoption as the national anthem. Perhaps most surprisingly, however, was the hymn’s role in the larger Atlantic world during the World War I era. Because of its generic expressions of national righteousness and its emphasis on the duty to use force against evil, for example, the “Battle Hymn” was promoted by British nationalist poets like Rudyard Kipling and became a staple of British wartime hymnody after 1914. Unphased by the hymn’s overt republican associations, the political and cultural leadership of the British wartime state recognized the usefulness of a militant hymn that contained “one of the most powerful evocations of Christendom and holy war in the history of the West.” (129) Not surprisingly, public performances of the hymn also became a way to cement the Anglo-American alliance after the United States entered the war in 1917.

Underscoring the multivalent potential of Howe’s poetic achievement, Gamble finds evidence that, in the twentieth century, the Battle Hymn was adopted by Americans of nearly all stripes including socialists and labor radicals, fundamentalists and religious liberals, civil rights activists and conservative radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh. With poignant irony, Gamble notes that while Julia Ward Howe had adopted viscerally anti-Mormon views during the late nineteenth century, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir’s performances of and wildly successful 1959 recording of the Battle Hymn were central to Mormonism’s quest to overcome its controversial early history and to refashion itself as an all-American, mainstream faith. But in the final section of the book, Gamble argues that the ubiquity of the Battle Hymn now threatens to empty it of meaning and to sever its connection to the nation’s historic experience. Now fully detached from its genesis as an expression of Howe’s devotion to the antislavery cause and her embrace of a

nation made holy by its commitment to human freedom, the “Battle Hymn” has simply become “a Song of Innocence” by which Americans “remind themselves that they are good.” (238)

For students of Civil War memory, *A Fiery Gospel* uses the Battle Hymn of the Republic to provide another compelling description of the war’s cultural afterlife and as such marks a significant achievement. That achievement would have been even greater had the author focused more direct and extended attention on the Reconstruction era, a period when potent cultural materials such as the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” assumed overt and very raw political meanings. Gamble moves quickly from the end of the war to Howe’s support of American expansion and thus leaves readers to wonder how black activists and their allies among the Radical Republicans employed her crusading language against the terrorism of Redemption and the emergence of the Jim Crow system. He does note a few white southern objections to the uses of the hymn during the twentieth century, and there are a few African American voices raised in support of it but given his emphasis on the genesis and original meaning of the hymn the limited focus these issues is somewhat surprising.

Yet this omission does not detract from the remarkable story told in this book and its cogent analysis of how a religious conception of American nationalism has shaped and continues to shape the history of the United States.

Paul E. Teed is Professor of History at Saginaw Valley State University where he teaches courses on 19th-century U.S. history and American religious history. His most recent work is Joseph and Harriet Hawley’s Civil War: Partnership, Ambition and Sacrifice (2018).